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## When national social partners interact in a multi-level environment: the case of the European social dialogue.

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*Work in progress, comments are welcome*

### Abstract

*Through the European social dialogue, the national trade unions and employer organisations are closely involved in the European decision-making process. Yet, taking part in the European social dialogue is not an obvious action for domestic actors. Unions and employers' representatives act within industrial relations systems, which are determined by stakes, which are strictly national and their action is still mainly directed towards the national political arenas. So, how can one explain the motivations of national actors to invest at European level where negotiations can turn out to be much more complex? This paper looks at the involvement of the national social partners in the European social dialogue and examines more particularly the strategies they develop when they act in a multi-level environment. From a series of case studies and a comparative analysis conducted on two sectoral committees- hospitals and agriculture- and national organisations coming from 13 countries, the analysis shows that according to the different national situations, the unions and employers' organisations participate in the European social dialogue with the objective of acquiring new opportunities to influence and to maintain existing rights. It also appears the actors that actually weight on the European decisions, have already considerable institutional and organisational capacities at the national level. The European social dialogue would therefore seem to reproduce the structures of existing capacity at national level. Only those actors who, at domestic level, have the capacity to intervene in the decision-making and to develop practices and norms with autonomy, are able to weight on the European decision-making process. Marginal and weak domestic actors remain therefore marginal and weak in the European social dialogue.*

## INTRODUCTION

Social partners have been associated to the European decision-making process from the early decades of the European Community. Since the 1950s, informal joint committees were already established in sectors affected by the first European regulations and the launch of the European Coal and Steel Community: extractive industries in 1952, agriculture in 1964, road transport in 1965, inland waterways in 1967, railways in 1972 and fishing in 1975 (Dufresne, 2006). Such bodies played at first a consultative role, but their role and status evolved throughout the integration process and the number of sectors having their own committee grew until the broad coverage of manufacturing and service activities with today's forty-three committees (Degryse, 2015).

A major turning point occurred in the 1980s when Jacques Delors, then President of the European Commission, gathered European trade unions and employers' associations at Val Duchesse in Brussels for conferences with the aim to formally associate the social partners to the finalization of the Economic and Monetary Union. Through these series of meetings, they finally laid the foundations of the European bipartite social dialogue (Didry and Mias, 2005).

A few years later, the Social Protocol annexed to the Maastricht Treaty granted the European social partners the right to be consulted by the European Commission on all legislative initiatives in the social policy field and the right to develop bilateral relations and to conclude agreements (Falkner, 1998). Therefore, social partners formally became neo-corporatist actors in European social politics and they gained the status of 'co-legislators' able to produce their own rules and norms (Falkner, 1998; Welz, 2008).

If the Treaty formally recognised the European trade unions and the employers' associations as 'co-legislators', the European social dialogue committees are actually composed of those organisations' affiliates, the national social partners. Each delegation, trade unions and employers, are granted the right to invite 28 national representatives. Therefore the outcomes of the negotiations are supposed to take into account of the diverse national interests. Yet, when looking at the composition of the committees, it appears all national representatives are not present.

Indeed, their participation in the European social dialogue is not mandatory and taking part in the daily work of the committees is not an obvious action for domestic actors. Industrial relations are still mainly rooted within domestic contexts and employment issues are mainly dealt with at the national level (Visser, 2005). Some questions can be raised. What are the reasons and motivations of the national actors to invest at European level where negotiations can turn out to be much more complex? Do they participate and if so to what extent are they involved?

The literature on the Europeanization of interests groups and the approach of the multi-level governance highlight the strategies undertaken by national groups when they encounter different levels of power. Scholars of the multi-level approach consider the multiplication of levels as quite positive for actors who benefit from additional channels of influence and ways to choose venues more responsive to their claim (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Pralle, 2003). Yet, when looking at the access of the interests groups to the European decision-making process, the literature on interest groups demonstrate that the different groups do not have the same opportunities according to organisational or institutional factors (Beyers and Kerremans, 2012; Kluver, 2012).

Drawing on a comparative analysis conducted on two sectoral committees, agriculture and hospitals, and national organisations coming from 13 countries, this paper looks at the involvement of the national social partners in the European sectoral social dialogue committees. It will highlight more particularly the conditions on which their participation rely and examine the strategies they develop when they act in a multi-level environment. The contribution of the paper is twofold. Firstly, the paper provides empirical evidence about the participation of national trade unions and employers 'associations within the European sectoral social dialogue committees while no systematic data has been processed until now. Secondly, the paper presents a parsimonious theoretical model that integrates institutional and organisational factors as well as the strategies of the actors into an integrated and coherent theoretical framework.

The paper proceeds as follows: first the theoretical framework is presented, followed by the research design and methodology. Data about the conditions of the involvement of national social partners in the European social dialogue are analysed using the Multi-Value Qualitative Comparative Analysis supplemented by a qualitative data analysis. The final sections present the main findings and conclusions are drawn.

## BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous studies on the European social dialogue essentially describe its historical and institutional environment and categorize its different types of outcomes and instruments (Dufresne et al. 2006; Léonard et al. 2007; Welz 2008). These last two decades, the issue of implementation of the joint texts was increasingly addressed (Falkner et al. 2005; Smismans, 2008). Scholars mainly dealt with the complex issue of the national implementation and follow-up of the ‘soft’ non-binding agreements of the cross-sectoral dialogue (Prosser, 2012; Visser and Martin, 2008) and sectoral dialogue (Perin, 2014; Pochet et al. 2009; Weber, 2010). Yet, when looking at the conditions enhancing a domestic implementation, most of these studies rely on an institutional approach and very few highlight the role played by the national social partners.

Keune and Marginson propose to draw on multi-level governance perspectives to understand the complexity of industrial relations in Europe (Keune and Marginson, 2013). In their view, the emergence of transnational levels in industrial relations provides new opportunities and simultaneously adds new limits and constraints to the national social partners’ scope of action. Indeed, globalization and the European Union led to a multiplication of levels of power and non-governmental actors acquired an increasing role in the political decision-making (Marks and Hooghe, 2004). In a multi-level environment, political actors as well as interest groups have access to alternative political venues and they are therefore able to choose venues more responsive to their claims (Marks and McAdam, 1996). Sarah Pralle particularly underlines the ‘venue shopping’ strategies of non-governmental actors at international level: *“Venue shopping refers to the activities of advocacy groups and policymakers who seek out a decision setting where they can air their grievances with current policy and present alternative proposals”* (Pralle, 2003: 233).

Therefore, in a multi-level context, marginal actors within their domestic context would be able to seek out other venues and compensate their weak influence by acting at another level of power (Marks and McAdam, 1996). Scholars looking at the European Union and its impact on the interest groups and social movements rely as well on this “compensation hypothesis” to explain the national actors’ externalization strategies towards the European level (Guiraudon, 2000; della Porta and Caiani, 2009).

Yet, some scholars questioned the multi-level governance approach pointing up that power relationships are not sufficiently considered (Keune and Marginson, 2013; Kjaer, 2004). One cannot ignore that in political arenas some actors have more power than others and may therefore dominate the allocation of values. The literature on interest groups particularly emphasized the actors’ power resources and the way it conditions their access to the decision-making process. Resource mobilization theory particularly insists on the role of resources for interest groups activity (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that the influence and access of national interest groups on the European arenas is mediated by the resources at their disposal (Dür, 2008; Eising, 2007; Kluver, 2012). Several authors particularly underline that the success of lobbying activities rely on the ability of the interest groups to provide goods required by the European institutions. On one hand, European institutions are understaffed and look constantly for external expertise (Saurugger, 2002; Kluver, 2012). Hence to provide this expertise, interest groups need important financial and human resources. On the other hand, interest groups representativeness is equally important. European institutions rely on interest groups to get an idea about the interests and preferences of the European population and to meet its democratic legitimacy requirements (Kohler-Koch et al. 2013).

Following rational choice institutionalism, the behavior of actors is also shaped by the institutional context that can be enabling as well as constraining (Kitschelt, 1986; Scharpf 1997). The patterns of interest intermediation shape the general openness of political system towards interest groups. Accordingly, scholars demonstrate a correlation between the national institutional context of interest groups and their ability to develop venue shopping strategies. Following the *positive persistence hypothesis*, interest groups who enjoy a considerable access

at national level are more likely to externalize their activities and to access the European decision-making process (Eising, 2007). When interest groups are usually integrated into the political process, they develop the skills, knowledge and networks that are necessary to access and influence public decisions. It constitutes an additional asset to be involved at European level (Beyers and Kerremans, 2012).

The Europeanization of interest groups has been apprehended according to different perspectives. Because scholars concentrate on some specific groups or specific policies, these theories might sometimes be contradictory and bring incoherent explanations (Kluver, 2013). Yet, the different features that were highlighted constitute key explanative factors of the interest groups strategies when they act in a multi-level environment.

In this paper, we propose to look at the conditions explaining the involvement of the national social partners within the European sectoral social dialogue committees. Their participation is indeed crucial to ensure efficient outcomes of the European social dialogue. On one hand, it guarantees that the content of the agreements represent the interest of all member states and on the other hand it enhances the domestic implementation process. While economy and politics have been Europeanized and even globalized, industrial relations seem however to remain mainly rooted within their national context (Eckhard et al., 2015; Visser, 2005). What are therefore the motivations of the national social partners to invest time and people within the European social dialogue where discussions might be much more complex and where outcomes might have much less impacts?

Few studies looked at the participation of the national actors in the ESSD committees and no systematic database exists. Yet, a small survey conducted by the European Commission in 2010 shows that there are significant differences in participation from one member state to another. Participation rates are generally high for representatives from Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and low for representatives from new member states as Cyprus, Malta, Estonia, Romania or Slovakia (European Commission, 2010). Referring to quantitative analyses on the topics covered by the joint texts and the content of committee work programmes, Pochet et al. (2009) demonstrated that social partners seem to be interested in discussing

subjects that are connected to European policies and transnational challenges that go beyond their national scope of action (Pochet et al., 2009).

Following the proponents of the multi-level approach, social partners could find reasons to act at the EU level in order to pursue national objectives (Marks and McAdam, 1996; Pralle, 2003). If an organisation is willing to defend its position on a certain issue but is unable to do so due to its weak negotiating position within its domestic system, or because its counterpart refuse to negotiate, such an organisation may be motivated to handle the issue at the European level. The European social dialogue could therefore bring additional opportunities to social partners to influence and act on European social policies but also the opportunity to bypass their national political system. Accordingly, it can be presumed that *national social partners will invest the ESSD committees if the European social dialogue is perceived as an additional action opportunity with regard to their national structure of opportunities* (hypothesis 1).

Furthermore, being involved within European levels of decisions requires resources, people, and expertise (Balme and Chabanet, 2002; Saurugger, 2002). Some organisations interested in participating may face material obstacles, such as lack of representatives who can travel to Brussels or little or no knowledge of the working languages (Pochet et al. 2009). Organisations will thus be actively involved in the work of the committees if they dispose from people who can travel regularly to Brussels and to invest time and knowledge in the European agenda. In addition, the *positive persistence hypothesis* posits that access to the domestic political arena is positively correlated with Europeanization (Eising, 2007). Interest groups who enjoy a considerable access at the national level are also more likely to accede the European decision-making process. Participating in the European social dialogue indeed requires experience in collective bargaining, which is generally the case for organisations from the 'old' member states, but much less from ones from the new ones (Léonard et al., 2006). Hence, it seems these institutional abilities are determined by the national position of the organisation and thus depend on the national industrial relations systems. Marginal groups, with few resources and little collective bargaining experience, will meet difficulties to be mobilised at the European level. It can therefore be presumed that *actors will be easily involved within the ESSD committees if at domestic level they already possess a strong institutional position and important organisational resources* (Hypothesis 2).



If both hypotheses seem *a priori* conflicting, in this paper it is presumed that they are not mutually exclusive. The ability of the social partners to be involved in the European decision-making appears as not being a sufficient explanation. Without no interests for European policies, an organisation will not invest its resources in an additional political venue. Institutional structures do not only pose constraints on actors but also provide opportunities for them to pursue their interests. According to the actor-centered institutionalism, the national actors are thus influenced but not entirely determined by their institutional context (Scharpf, 1997). This theoretical framework therefore concentrates on the interactions between actors and their multi-level environment

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to assess the involvement of the national social partners in the ESSD committees, the participation of national trade unions and employers' associations representatives coming from thirteen countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Romania, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom) was examined in two sectoral committees, agriculture and hospitals.

The rationale for the country selection was to include a variety of industrial regimes and political systems. The agriculture and hospitals sectoral committees were selected because they are highly active in terms of participation of national organisations but also in terms of outcomes. They are besides highly contrasted in terms of ownership, socio-economic issues, degree of Europeanization and level of internationalization. In agriculture, a first informal committee was already functioning in the early 1960's while social dialogue in the hospital sector is much more recent and dates back from 2006. In terms of Europeanization, both sectors are respectively instances of 'most likely case' and 'less likely case' (Kluver, 2010; Martinsen, 2012). While policies in agriculture are highly Europeanised, health care remains mainly a subsidiary competence.

The involvement of 34 national representatives (16 representatives from national employers organisations and 18 from a national trade union; 16 from the agricultural committee and 18 from the hospital committee) was more particularly examined. Forty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted from July 2011 to November 2012 with the officials from the national social partners' organisations but also with officials from the European federations and the European Commission. Substantial documentary data were also collected and non-participant observation of the ESSD committees was carried out. The findings presented here are based on a Multi-Value Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Cronqvist and Berg-Schlosser, 2009). Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a data analysis approach based on Boolean algebra that aims to link the case sensitivity of qualitative approaches with a formalized and replicable tool of analysis (Ragin, 1987; Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). In the QCA approach, causality is apprehended as a 'conjunctural causation', which means that several causes generate the outcome. This implies that combination of several factors (conditions) explains the outcome and that different 'paths' may lead to the same outcome (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). QCA is thus appropriate to test the aforementioned hypothesis since it was theoretically presumed that participation could be explained by configurations of different factors. In this study, Multi-Value QCA was employed because it allows the inclusion of intermediary values while QCA only allows dichotomous variables and avoid therefore a loss of information (Cronqvist and Berg-Schlosser, 2009).

According to the first hypothesis, *national social partners will invest the ESSD committees if the European social dialogue is perceived as an additional action opportunity with regard to their national structure of opportunities*. The interest of the national social partners for the European social dialogue as a new opportunity for action was identified from interviews with the national actors as well as from internal documents such as the social dialogue committee's minutes. Different degrees of interests were observed (for more QCA technical explanations related to mvQCA, see Perin, 2014). When the national representative expresses no concern for the European social dialogue and does not consider it as a potential level of action, the condition STRAT is coded 0. On the contrary, when the representative considers the European social dialogue as a relevant opportunity for action, the conditions STRAT is coded 2. On the other hand, some actors express an interest but that remain limited because they participate to the

ESD in order to be informed about the future European policies and to react to position and agreements that could contradict their own national interests. For instance, Belgian trade unionists in the hospital sector expressed an interest to be involved but it remains passive and limited. According to their opinion, the European social dialogue is not the best way to defend the labour 'rights because the agreements remain non-binding and the standards are lower than the regulations that already exist in Belgium. They are though interested to participate but more in a logic of continuity of their national activities towards the European level. The condition STRAT is therefore coded 1.

On the other hand, the second hypothesis underlines the necessity for the social partners to have a strong institutional position at national level as well as important organisational resources. The institutional position of the social partners was appraised from the main level of collective bargaining, the coverage rate of agreements, the role played by the sectoral social partners in collective bargaining and in public policy-making (Traxler, 2007; 2009). Organisational resources were indirectly assessed from density of the organisation with regards to the organisation's domain, density of the organisation with regards to the sector, the total number of members and members in the sector concerned (Traxler, 2007; 2009). The condition CAP was coded 1 when the national social partners 'organisations were assessed to have the institutional and organisational capacity to be involved in the committees (see more details in table in annex).

## DATA ANALYSIS

From interviews and internal documents, three degrees of involvement have been observed among the national social partners. The 'Central players' constitute a first group. Those national actors regularly participate in committee meetings and they are closely involved in the decision-making process through their work in specific working groups or smaller group meetings such as 'steering committees' or 'drafting groups'. They bring their national inputs to the committee and usually have an underlying project for the European social dialogue.

Within the hospital sector committee, the Swedish, German, Dutch and British representatives play a central role while in the agricultural committee Belgian and French employers representatives hold a central position.

*“(...) the FNSEA held the chair of the GEOPA (Group of Professional Agricultural Organisations in the European Union) for ten years. Being involved in the steering committee allowed us to have a strong influence on the agenda and the decision-making within the committee”* (interview with a representative with the French employer organisation in agriculture).

A second group of actors rather act as ‘observers’. They are not present regularly; they participate when they think the issue at stake has a certain added value. They participate to plenary sessions and sometimes to working groups but are not involved in the steering committees. This type of participation can be seen as a ‘passive reaction’ rather than a ‘proactive action’ the aim being, rather to react to some issues or to learn about them than to propose a project or new ideas. For instance, a Swedish employer representative in the agricultural sector made the following comment about his involvement.

*“(...) I’m trying to go to all plenary meetings. I missed some of the working groups but I actually try to go to everything and definitively to the plenary because the most decisional (...) if they want input, they will get input. And if there is something we feel very strongly about, then we will let them know as well”.*

In the hospital sector, trade unions from Belgium, France and Romania have a peripheral involvement and act as ‘observers’.

The third group corresponds to the ‘absent players’ and covers a wide range of actors with diverse reasons for not participating. Some of them attend from time to time the plenary meetings and try to get some information via e-mails or internet while most of them remain completely absent. In the hospital sector, the representative from EPSU (the European Public

Service Union) notes an overrepresentation from trade unions from the north western countries while trade unions from the south or the east of Europe are much less present.

*“Traditionally, we have a strong Nordic representation because the level of unionisation is very high in the Nordic countries. They are also very keen on the social dialogue because it corresponds to their model. We tend to have an overrepresentation of the Nordic countries while there is an underrepresentation of the Mediterranean countries and the Central and Eastern countries. Some countries are present such as Czech Republic, Romania, and Latvia. For the others, it is difficult and it is partly an issue of language (...).”*

This first qualitative analysis shows that representatives from national trade unions and employers associations are actively involved in the work of the sectoral committees and that some are more active than others. How can one explain these different degrees of involvement? Considering the conditions highlighted above as well as the presumption that these conditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the comparative qualitative analysis (QCA) is used to search for the conditions that are necessary and sufficient for participation.

The table of configurations below represents the combinations of conditions leading to participation or non-participation. Actors that participate as observers or central players are coded PART1 while actors that are absent from the committees are coded PART0.

**Table 1. Truth table: conditions explaining participation**

CAP	STRAT	PART (outcome)	N (34)
1	2	1	18
1	0	0	1
1	1	1	8
0	2	1	5
0	0	0	2

Using inference, QCA allows generating a parsimonious result. This implies that the software includes ‘non-observed cases’ called the ‘logical remainders’. To illustrate the difference in

parsimony, the results obtained with and without the logical remainders have to be distinguished when presenting the results (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). At first, when the non-observed cases are not included, the analysis shows that the involvement can be explained by two configurations.

**Table 2. Formulas explaining participation (without the logical remainders)**

STRAT {2}	N=23
CAP {1}* STRAT {1}	N=8

On one hand, actors involved in the ESSD committees express a strong interest towards the European social dialogue as an additional opportunity of action (STRAT {2}). This situation covers two configurations. At first, organisations with low resource and a weak institutional position consider the European social dialogue as a way to compensate their weakness at national level (STRAT {2}\* CAP {0}). Organisations from Central and Eastern countries, such as Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania, are included in this configuration. Such organisations conceive their participation as a mean to gain legitimacy and recognition at EU level. It is also a mean to express their concern about their low working and living conditions near their European colleagues and to find solutions to improve it while their national authorities remain reluctant to act.

A Bulgarian employer in agriculture made the following comment.

*“So the CAP gave important financial resources for developing the Bulgarian agriculture (...) therefore we have a very active position in discussions on the European agriculture policy in Bulgaria and at European level as well. One of our main statement is the equality of funding between new and old member states (...) it is very important for the information exchange because (...) we can improve our work and at the same time we can even improve the work of EFFAT (European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions) with our specificities and contributions and to make them aware about the problems in the region, in the small countries and in the new member countries (...).”*

Even if Bulgarian employers experience a lack of resource, they are involved in the work of the committee. This can be explained by the action of the European Federations who grant resources (money, translation services,...) to the smaller organisations in order to encourage them to participate.

In the configuration CAP {1}\* STRAT {2}, organisations have a strong domestic position and important resources. They participate actively to the ESSD because they consider some issues cannot be settled without a transnational coordination or through the European institutions. Many organisations from the agriculture sector express their concern about the influence of European legislation but this concern was also expressed in the hospital sector.

*“(...) since almost all of the Swedish legislation today is more or less a copy-paste of the Directives, we need to influence at an early stage because once the Directives are established then we cannot really influenced them, they just come to Sweden as a legislation. So it’s a matter of being able to influence things before they are fixed”* (interview with a Swedish trade unionist in the hospital sector).

On the other hand, the configuration CAP{1}\*STRAT{1} rather corresponds to organisations with a strong domestic position who will consider they involvement in the European social dialogue more as in terms of continuity of the strategies they conduct at national level.

*“We have a tradition in Denmark for having a close social dialogue. So it is part of the Danish model (...) so it is just natural to do it at the European level as well”* (interview with a Danish representative of an employer organisation in the hospital sector).

This covers also the situation of the Swedish trade unions and employers in the agriculture sector. Agriculture issues are indeed less crucial because in terms of labour, Sweden experienced a decline of agriculture and the emergence of new green sectors. Yet they still participate in the ESD because it is close to their industrial relations model.

Results for the absence of the outcome are also examined because QCA does not expect to find a perfect 'causal symmetry'. However, in this study, it can be stated that the absence of interests towards the European social dialogue explains the non-participation.

**Table 3. Formula explaining the absence of participation (without the logical remainders)**

STRAT {0}	N=3
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Actors that consider the European social dialogue as a not relevant field of action includes two different configurations. At first, CAP{1}\*STRAT{0} includes organisation with a strong domestic position and organisational resources but that will chose not to participate to the European social dialogue because they believe their interests and the domestic issues can be better dealt with at national level. For instance, in Belgium, agriculture in itself does not employ lots of labour. There are much more workers employed in the garden and parks sector. Therefore, issues that are dealt with in the agricultural committee are too different from the Belgian unions concerns.

On the other hand, CAP {0}\*STRAT {0} refers to weak domestic organisations that do not consider Europe as a mean to compensate for their weakness. Given their lack of resources, they prefer to focus their strategies on domestic issues. Specific economic and political circumstances can explain this lack of interest. In the hospital sector, Irish and Greek trade unions were mostly concerned by the social consequences of the austerity measures that were being implemented and preferred to act at national level rather than at European level.

When the logical remainders are included, a more parsimonious formula is obtained. The necessary and sufficient condition of the participation is identified as STRAT {1, 2}. Therefore, the organisations involved in the ESD consider the European level as a relevant field of action to pursue their national interests. This strong interest can compensate for the lack of resources. Therefore, regardless the national institutional environment, the lack of interests STRAT {0} always conduct to the absence of the actors.

From the data observed earlier, a 'central' participation was distinguished from a more 'peripheral' participation. What conditions can therefore explained the different degrees of



involvement? In this second QCA analysis, when the actors have a central involvement, the participation is coded 1 and when the actors have a peripheral involvement or are absent, the participation is coded 0. The table of configurations below represents the combinations explaining the 'central' involvement of the national actors.

**Table 4: Truth table: conditions explaining central participation**

CAP	STRAT	Outcome	Cases N=34
1	2	1	N=18
1	0	0	N=1
1	1	0	N=8
0	2	0	N=5
0	0	0	N=2

From the table of configurations below, it appears the combination CAP {1}\*STRAT {2} is the only one leading to a central involvement of the national social partners. This outcome implies that organisations that considers the European social dialogue as a relevant political arena to defend their interest will be centrally involved. Yet, only those organisations with sufficient resources and a strong institutional position at the national level will be able to be involved in the heart of the decision-making process. In the hospital sector, this situation refers for instance to the Dutch social partners.

At national level, the Dutch social partners have a strong autonomy in negotiating collective agreements and they can also have a strong input on the Health Ministry being regularly consulted by the civil servants and political actors. They also benefit from important resources to deal with the European agenda. A joint foundation, StAZ (Stichting arbeidsmarkt Ziekenhuizen) provides experts helping the social partners to prepare the European issues and to react on the European agenda.

*“Within StAZ we have people that support us with the European activities. So the translation which was a complicated factor for several countries [...] here, we have dealt about it in a couple of weeks [...]”* (interview with a Dutch representative of the employers association in the hospital sector).

Besides, both parties in the Netherlands are conscious about the increasing impacts of Europe on health public systems and they are convinced about the necessity to coordinate with other countries about transnational issues such as the mobility of the workers.

*“There was a lot of fuss in our media about immigration and healthcare workers from abroad (...) so it was really lightened and not only on the ethical parts but also about the labour market, about dumping, about lowering labour conditions (...). We are a very small country. What Germany and the United Kingdom are doing is affecting us (...)”*  
(interview with a Dutch trade unionist of the hospital sector).

On the other hand, several combinations prevent the central involvement of the national actors. Among those combinations,  $CAP\{0\} * STRAT\{2\}$  corresponds to the situation of organisations expressing a strong interest towards the European social dialogue, for instance, organisations from Central and Eastern Europe looking for a new legitimacy. However, their lack of resources prevents them to significantly participate to the European social dialogue decisions. Such organisations do not have sufficient experts or financial resources to have an in-depth knowledge of the European agenda and therefore to be involved in the day-to-day decision-making.

No matter how the remainders are treated, when looking at the conditions enhancing a central participation, the same result is obtained:  $CAP\{1\} * STRAT\{2\}$ . When looking at the conditions preventing a central participation and when the logical remainders are included, the following results are obtained.

**Table 5: Formulas explaining the absence of central participation (with the logical remainders)**

$CAP\{0\}$	N=7
$STRAT\{0,1\}$	N=11
Simplifying assumption	$CAP\{0\} STRAT\{1\}$

Weak resources and a weak institutional position as well as a limited interest for the European social dialogue as a potential political arena are conditions preventing a central participation.

On a final analysis, the ‘observers’ are examined. The table of configurations highlights two combinations. The peripheral participation is coded 1 while central actors and absent actors are coded 0.

**Table 6: Truth table: conditions explaining peripheral participation**

CAP	STRA	Outcome	Cases N=34
1	2	0	N=18
1	0	0	N=1
1	1	1	N=8
0	2	1	N=5
0	0	0	N=2

Two combinations lead to a peripheral participation. At first, when organisations have few resources (CAP{0}\*STRA{2}), their involvement is lesser than organisations enjoying experience and people with time and money to be regularly involved in the meetings and to work on European and transnational issues. Secondly, some organisations do possess the necessary resources to be centrally involved in the ESD committees (CAP{1}\*STRA{1}), but because their interest remains limited and because they do not consider the European social dialogue as a relevant political arena, their investment will also remain peripheral.

According to French and Belgian trade unions in the hospital sector, the existing regulations set superior standards than the provisions recommended at the EU level. In addition, they consider that transnational recruitment is not a solution to the shortage of staff in the health sector and they prefer to deal with it through negotiations on employment conditions within their own domestic context (interview with Belgian and French trade unions in the hospital sector). Belgian and French trade unions remain for this reason at the periphery of the hospital committee.

The minimization operations related to the absence of a peripheral participation are not detailed here, the results obtained being already examined in the analysis of participation and central participation. The main outcome to consider here is that actors will act as observers

either because they have a limited interest in the ESD (STRAT{1}) or because they have not sufficient resources to be more involved in the committees (CAP{0}\*STRAT{2}).

## DISCUSSION

Several analyses concerning the European social dialogue underlined the major role played by the national social partners (European Commission, 2010; Léonard, 2008; Pochet et al., 2009). Yet until now, no research looked at the involvement of the national social partners in the ESD committees. The aim of this paper was to look specifically at how and why national actors participate in the European social dialogue decision-making process?

Two hypotheses were proposed and built from two strands of literature, the multi-level governance approach and the literature on the Europeanization of interests groups. Informed by the multi-level perspective, the first hypothesis posits that *national social partners will invest the ESSD committees if the European social dialogue is perceived as an additional action opportunity with regard to their national structure of opportunities*. On the other hand, informed by a neo-institutionalist perspective, the second hypothesis states that *actors will be easily involved within the ESSD committees if at domestic level they already possess a strong institutional position and important organisational resources*. Both hypotheses were considered as not mutually exclusive.

Through a qualitative analysis, the motivations of the national social partner organisations were examined. Actors dedicate time, money and staff to the European social dialogue when they are conscious of the weight and impact of the European regulations on their sector and when they consider some transnational issues (such as the mobility of the workers) cannot be solved unless a transnational coordination. The main motivation expressed by national trade unions and employers associations was indeed to be informed about European policies and to be able to influence the decisions at the beginning of the regulation process. Eleven interviewees out of sixteen expressed this motivation in the agricultural sector while in the hospital sector, sixteen respondents out of eighteen insisted on this particular motivation. Also, according to the institutional context, motivations can be different. Actors coming from countries where industrial relations are weak consider their involvement at EU level as a mean to gain the

legitimacy they don't have at the national level and hope to compensate their weak domestic position by their action at EU level. On the other hand, actors coming from countries where industrial relations are strong see the European social dialogue as an additional level of action helping them to complete the actions undertaken at local, regional and national level. In this case, however, some actors see the European social dialogue as non-essential because higher standards are already met at national level.

The first QCA analysis that was conducted on the involvement of the national actors into the committees underlined that regardless the national context, it is essential that the national actors see the ESD as an opportunity to gain or at least maintain their influence on social policies. However, different degrees of involvement were observed and the ability and the resources of the national organisations appeared necessary for the organisations to become strong influencers within the committees. Therefore, both hypotheses were confirmed but cannot be considered independent from each other.

The *compensation hypothesis* was demonstrated when explaining the involvement of the actors within the ESSD committees. This situation mostly corresponds to organisations coming from Central and Eastern countries that expressed their motivation to integrate the European social dialogue in order to gain legitimacy and the opportunity to bypass their national governments. In fact, the involvement of weak organisations in the committees can be explained by the support of the European Federations. Capacity building initiatives are organised in order to foster the participation of the small organisations and some additional resources are provided to such actors. However, the involvement of such actors remains at best peripheral because they lack the necessary resources and expertise to be really involved in the heart of the decision-making process.

The European social dialogue seems therefore to reproduce the structures of existing capacity at national level. Only those actors who, at domestic level, have the capacity to intervene in the decision-making and to develop practices and norms, are able to weight on the European decision-making process. Therefore, marginal and weak domestic actors tend to remain marginal and weak in the European social dialogue.

On the other hand, the institutionalist perspective alone is not sufficient to explain the involvement of the national actors. The results of the QCA analysis showed that the condition CAP was not a necessary and sufficient condition to enhance participation. Indeed organisations with resources as well as a strong position within their national systems do not necessarily participate to the European social dialogue. Such organisations indeed consider the European social dialogue as superfluous because they already have autonomy and influence within their domestic context and their national standards are higher than the European regulations.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, a theoretical framework was presented in order to explain why some national social partners' organisations are involved in the ESSD committees while others do not. Drawing on the multi-level governance approach as well as different perspectives on the Europeanization of the interest groups, conditions related to the preferences of the national social partners and to their ability to influence multiple political arenas were identified.

These theoretical assumptions were tested empirically based on a comparative analysis of the involvement and participation of thirty-four representatives of national trade unions and employers associations. It was demonstrated that national actors are involved according different degrees of involvement that directly depends on different combinations of conditions. Firstly, the analysis has shown that according to different national opportunity structures, the unions and employer 'organisations participate in the European social dialogue with the objective of acquiring new opportunities to influence the European and national legislations or at least to maintain existing rights. The findings are quite consistent with previous studies that argued that instead of a European system of industrial relations, the European social dialogue mainly serves as an alternative lobbying channel for the social partners involved (de Boer et al. 2005).

Secondly, through the analysis of the different degrees of involvement, it appeared that actors that actually weight on the European decisions have already considerable institutional and organisational capacities at the national level. The European social dialogue seem therefore to reproduce the domestic structure of existing capacities. Only those actors who, at domestic level, have the capacity to intervene in the decision-making process are able to do so at the European level as well. These findings are quite consistent with studies that examined the Europeanization strategies of interest groups (Beyers and Kerremans, 2012; Kluver, 2012; Knodt, Quittkat and Greenwood, 2012). Therefore, because of the complexity of the issues, expertise remain one of the most important mean to influence Europe and to become a European player. Regarding the European social dialogue, such findings particularly underline the necessity to increasingly develop capacity building activities in order to gain a more balanced European social dialogue.

Finally, the analysis proposed here tends to support the conclusion that the European social dialogue is currently far from constituting a European industrial relations system. The development of the European social dialogue is thus in strong need for capacity building of each national social partners organisations but also for awareness raising about the increasing necessity to deal with employment issues at European level.

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## ANNEXE

**Table 7: coding of condition CAP**

Country	Organisation	SD level	Coverage rate	Density	Sectoral density	Total number of members	Number of members in sector	Collective bargaining	Public policy	Code
BE	Boerenbond (EMP-A)	Cross-sectoral	100%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	ok	ok	1
	CSC (TU-A)	Cross-sectoral	100%	n.a	n.a	n.a	7500	ok	ok	1
	CSC (TU-H)	Cross-sectoral	100%	n.a	30%	148908	n.a	ok	ok	1
BG	CBAOB (EMP_A)	Sectoral/company	20%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	no	no	0
	FNSZ (TU-A)	Sectoral /company	20%	n.a	n.a	5930	n.a	ok	no	0
DE	GLFA (EMP-A)	sectoral	60%-19%	90%-10%	n.a	n.a	n.a	ok	ok	1
	IG BAU (TU-A)	sectoral	60%-19%	n.a	5%	391546	n.a	ok	ok	1
	VKA (EMP-H)	sectoral	52%-46%	n.a	n.a	n.a	650	ok	ok	1
	Ver.di (TU-H)	sectoral	52%-46%	n.a	n.a	2274731	348500	ok	ok	1
	Marburger Bund (TU-H)	sectoral	52%-46%	46%	77%	108000	81000	ok	no	1
	3F (TU-A)	Sectoral/company	50%	75%	70%	381545	15000	ok	no	1
	Danske regioner (EMP-H)	Sectoral/company	100%	100%	100%	n.a	n.a	ok	ok	1
DK	DSR (TU-H)	Sectoral/company	100%	90%	100%	55174	34193	ok	ok	1
	PASEGES (EMP-A)	sectoral	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	no	ok	0
EL	POEDIN (TU-H)	sectoral	34%	85-90%	57,80%	85000	85000	no	no	0
	ASAJA (EMP-A)	sectoral	100%	50%	8%	200000	200000	ok	ok	1
	FTA-UGT (TU-A)	sectoral	100%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	ok	ok	1
FR	FNSEA (EMP-A)	Sectoral/company	100%	n.a	>50%	32000	32000	ok	ok	1
	CFDT (TU-A)	Sectoral/company	100%	n.a	39%	60000	n.a	ok	ok	1
	CGT (TU-H)	Sectoral/company	100%	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	ok	ok	1
IE	IFA (EMP-A)	company	n.a	n.a	>73%	85000	n.a	ok	ok	1
	HSE (EMP-H)	company	80%	76,9%	n.a	n.a	n.a	ok	ok	1
	IMPACT (TU-H)	company	80%	n.a	20%	55000	26000	ok	ok	1
LV	LSB(EMP-H)	company	100%	64%	64%	52	52	no	ok	0
	LVSADA (TU-H)	company	100%	n.a	57,20%	n.a	n.a	no	ok	0
NL	NVZ (EMP-H)	Sectoral/company	100%	100%	59%	170	170	ok	ok	1
	FNV (TU-H)	Sectoral/company	100%	n.a	n.a	352000	37500	ok	ok	1
RO	SANITAS (TU-H)	sectoral	100%	65%	75%	120000	109000	no	no	0
SE	SLA (EMP-A)	sectoral	100%	17%	6,40%	4000	n.a	ok	no	1
	Kommunal (TU-A)	sectoral	100%	90%	50%	570000	6000	ok	no	1
	SKL (EMP-H)	sectoral	100%	100%	95%	311	n.a	ok	no	1
	Kommunal (TU-H)	sectoral	100%	90%	75%	570000	61000	ok	no	1
UK	NFU (EMP-A)	company	12%	75%	n.a	63000	n.a	ok	ok	1
	NHS (EMP-H)	company	n.a	100%	100%	227	n.a	ok	ok	1
	RCN	company	n.a	n.a	n.a	380000	n.a	ok	ok	1

According to Traxler et al. 2005, 2007, interviews and internal documents